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Sermon

Dr. Mary (Joy) Philip¹

Job 12:7-9 NRSV

“But ask the animals, and they will teach you;
the birds of the air, and they will tell you;
ask the plants of the earth,[a] and they will teach you;
and the fish of the sea will declare to you.
Who among all these does not know
that the hand of the Lord has done this?”

As an institution, we have not only endorsed the Earth Charter but also signed a memorandum of understanding with the Earth Charter Initiative, and, on September 11th our Dean, Dr. Mark Harris already gave us a poignant start to how we live into the principles of the Earth Charter. The principles of the Earth Charter falls under 4 main themes - Respect and Care for the Community of Life, Ecological Integrity, Social and Economic Justice, Democracy, Non-violence and Peace.

We stand at a critical moment in Earth’s history, a time when humanity must choose its future.² This sentence in the preamble of the EC gets to me every time. Everyday, when I make a choice, whether it is about the coffee that I drink, or the clothes that I decide to wear or purchase or the food that I consume or the mode of transportation that I use to come to work, I am choosing my future, not just my future but that of my children and grandchildren. Talking about the choices we make, we had our elections a little over a month ago. Who and what did we choose? Our choices will have consequences! The Earth Charter at its core is about solidarity that respects the interconnected, communal nature of life on planet earth. It calls our attention to the rights of the earth; to listen to her voice, to care for her. She gave birth to us and now she is groaning in pain. Why are we not hearing her cry?

In 1985, Julie Gold wrote the song, “From a Distance.” It won the Grammy in 1990 when Bette Midler recorded it for her album, *Some People’s Lives*. Different versions of the song have been recorded over the years with varying interpretations but Julie, in a radio show on February 19, 2005 said that “the song is about the difference between how things appear to be and how they really are.” Take a look at the words.

From a distance the world looks blue and green,
and the snow-capped mountains white.
From a distance the ocean meets the stream,
and the eagle takes to flight.
From a distance, there is harmony,
and it echoes through the land.
It's the voice of hope, it's the voice of peace,

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² The Earth Charter (2000), <http://earthcharter.org/discover/the-earth-charter/>

it's the voice of every man.
From a distance we all have enough,
and no one is in need.
And there are no guns, no bombs, and no disease,
no hungry mouths to feed.
From a distance we are instruments
marching in a common band.
Playing songs of hope, playing songs of peace
They're the songs of every man.
God is watching us. God is watching us.
God is watching us from a distance.
From a distance you look like my friend,
even though we are at war.
From a distance I just cannot comprehend
what all this fighting is for.
From a distance there is harmony,
and it echoes through the land.
And it's the hope of hopes, it's the love of loves,
it's the heart of every man.
It's the hope of hopes, it's the love of loves.
This is the song of every man.
And God is watching us, God is watching us,
God is watching us from a distance.
Oh, God is watching us, God is watching.
God is watching us from a distance.

Yes, from a distance, things look pretty good.

But is it really the case? Is there harmony? Do we all have enough? Is there no one in need? Are there “no guns, no bombs, no disease and no hungry mouths to feed?” Does the world look blue and green? What about our oceans and rivers? The song ends with the words God is watching us from a distance. The thing is, God, whoever or whatever that might be for you, is not watching from a distance. God is in the ruins, God is in the ashes of the forest fire, in the dead corals, in the devastation, calling us to see and hear the earth, to see with our ears and hear with our eyes.

Two years ago on our way to the East coast to sing with Inshallah, we stopped at Moncton to see this amazing phenomenon called tidal bore. My husband and I were really excited as it was something new for us. We could hear the sound of the rushing water as high as 2-3 feet coming in from the Bay of Fundy. It was simply beautiful, but what was disconcerting was the number of plastic bags, plastic food wrappers, drinking bottles that came in with the tide. Littering of oceans is a global problem, and if we are not careful come 2050 there will be more plastic in the ocean than fish by weight.

We all know that extreme temperature conditions are becoming more common. Heavy rainfall in dry areas and drought in areas previously green and wet; snowfall in places where it was unheard of. Climate change is real! We cannot but pay attention. And, it is a matter of justice because it is those that have done the least to cause it, the poor, who suffer the most.

So, what do we do?

Listen to these words: “This is an incredible time to be alive: each of our actions matter. We have the opportunity to be part of a narrative of transformation, to play a role in the human story.”

These are the words of the now 40 year old Severn Cullis Suzuki or the 12 year old Canadian girl who silenced the world for 5 minutes calling attention to climate change in her speech to the UN’s Earth Summit in Rio in 1992. In 2017, Severn and her ECO friends, now adults with families of their own, marked the 25th anniversary of that event by inviting youth today to participate in an anniversary video project. Young children from the Americas participated in this. Let us listen to Severn’s speech from 1992.³ May be, it will inspire us to pay attention to the voice of the earth and care for her.

As Severn asks, “Who is going to speak on behalf of the starving children around the world whose cries go unheard?” How about the animals and the plants that are crying out? If we do not know how to heal the earth, let us stop breaking her. Severn’s words reminded me of Ezekiel 34:18 – Is it not enough for you to feed on the good pasture? Must you trample the rest of the pasture with your feet? Is it not enough for you to drink clear water? Must you muddy and foul the rest with your feet? This is what we do. It is time. It is time to change our ways. We must change our ways!

The present ecological crisis reflects a crisis in human consciousness, where the relationship with the earth and cosmos has been largely shaped and influenced by the stories that emphasized humanity’s dominion over nature. We need new stories born out of eco-consciousness, an earth consciousness, a relational and embodied understanding of ourselves vis-à-vis the earth, “that humanity is part of the earth, part of the universe, not a separate entity”⁴; we need a re-storying, new stories of our interconnectedness with the planet. As Job reminded us, “. . . ask the animals, and they will teach you, or the birds in the sky, and they will tell you; or speak to the earth, and it will teach you, or let the fish in the sea inform you.” Or as Rachel Carson said, “In every grain of sand there is a story of the earth.”⁵ So, let us decide now, here, to enable each other, our children, our grandchildren, our students, to listen to the voice of the earth and pay heed to her stories. Listen to the trees, the birds, the crickets, the corals, so that the re-storying starts now, and not just re-storying but a reformation in our actions. Let that start now and with each one of us here and whatever vocation we are engaged in. Let all of us, pool in our resources and transform our ways of living in such a way that earth consciousness becomes our language which in turn enables us to change the narrative and create a better world.

Let us be eco healers and not eco crucifiers, please!

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oJJGuIZVfLM> Accessed on September 18, 2019.

⁴ John Darrell DesRoches (2010), “The truth about stories: An autoethnography towards earth consciousness,” M.Ed Thesis, University of Prince Edward Island, Prince Edward Island.

⁵ Rachel Carson and Linda J. Lear (1998), *Lost woods: the discovered writing of Rachel Carson* (Boston: Beacon Press), 108.